



Collingwood, Robin George

Can the new idealism
dispense with mysticism?

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II.—By R. G. COLLINGWOOD.

By the "new idealism" Miss Underhill seems to mean the philosophy of Croce and Gentile. Her thesis is therefore a criticism of these writers, and I shall try to discover how far they are really open to her criticisms. This is a question of fact, and is solely concerned with the actual content of their philosophy, and especially that of Gentile, for reasons stated below.

By "mysticism" I take her to mean an intuitive or immediate consciousness of the supreme reality as one, eternal, and spiritual. The question therefore arises whether these philosophers differ from mysticism in content, *i.e.*, in having a different view of the nature of reality, or in form, *i.e.*, in not regarding the ultimate reality as capable of being apprehended intuitively. I am not certain what she means by "dispense with," but she might mean (i) ignore, leave out of the picture of human life, or (ii) dissociate oneself from, decline to identify oneself with. Thus a philosophy which denied that mysticism was a necessary element in human life would dispense with it, or try to, in the first sense; a philosophy which held that the proper method of philosophical thought was distinct from the method followed by mysticism would dispense with it, or try to, in the second.

The first sense may be at once dismissed. No philosopher worthy of the name ignores religion or tries to construct a view of human life in which it has no part whatever: and both Croce and Gentile identify mysticism with religion. Croce, it is true, does not in his systematic philosophy represent religion as one of the "necessary forms of the spirit," but he certainly tries to give us, even here, a philosophical account of religion, though a slight and not altogether satisfactory one. The only necessary

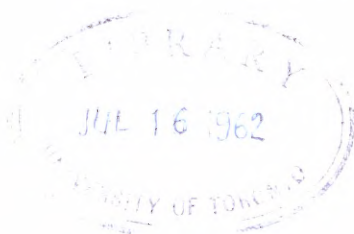
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forms of the spirit which he recognizes are art, history regarded as identical with philosophy, economic action, and moral action. Religion, in that case, is not a pure form of the spirit but a mixed form, a compound of elements drawn from various sources, and therefore unstable, because these elements are liable to separate out and pursue each its own way, and confused, because the different elements impose conflicting claims on the mind and this gives rise to a division of the mind against itself. This is not by any means altogether false as an account of certain characteristics of religion. For instance, religion is not wholly unconcerned with philosophy, like art; for it always contains a philosophical element. But it cannot allow this philosophical element to have its head and take command, for then what was religion would simply become philosophy. Thus religion has not that singleness of aim which marks a true form of the spirit: it contains a number of conflicting tendencies, to each of which it must say, *nec tecum possum vivere, nec sine te*.

This is the view of religion expressed in Croce's earlier works, and it evidently belongs to that rigid and abstract formalism which has given us the doctrine of the four "Forms of the Spirit." This doctrine represents not the vital and fertile element of Croce's philosophy, but its barren and mechanical side; and the greatness both of Croce himself and of his followers is shown by the extent to which they extricate themselves from its blighting influence. Croce himself, in his later works, partly modifies and partly ignores it: his abler successors break away from it altogether. But when this doctrine is no longer treated as a philosophical first principle, the depreciatory view of religion which is its corollary vanishes. For that view was only adopted because there was no room for religion in the formal scheme of the Philosophy of the Spirit.

This happens in Croce himself in such passages as the following. "Religion is nothing but the need for an orientation towards the

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concept and the value of life and reality as a whole. Without religion, without this orientation, no one can live; or at least one lives in division and perplexity of spirit, lives unhappily. A religion which coincides with philosophical truth is no doubt better than a mythological religion; but any religion, however mythological, is better than none." (*Cultura e vita morale*, p. 37.) Here, in a work written without special reference to the writer's formal philosophical views, we reach the germ of a new attitude to religion, which those views had suppressed.

This hint of a new attitude to religion is in Croce no more than a hint; but in Gentile it blossoms into a complete new philosophy of religion*. This is best expressed in the essay *Le Forme assolute dello Spirito*, in the volume *Il Modernismo e i Rapporti tra Religione e Filosofia* (1909). Religion, on this view, is a permanent and necessary form of the spirit. In so far as the spirit simply asserts itself, careless of the existence and the nature of any object for its thought, it expresses itself as art. Art is thus purely subjective and free imagination. In so far as it renounces this freedom of caprice and imagination and surrenders itself to its object, this object being of course the absolute object, the supreme reality, it expresses itself as religion. To art belong all the virtues of self-assertion, to religion those of loyalty, humility, self-denial. But neither of these forms exists by itself. Each as described is an abstraction, a limiting case, represents not anything that really exists but something that would exist if its opposite could (*per impossibile*) be annihilated. Actual human life is always a synthesis of art and religion, and so far as this synthesis is really effected and the two elements co-exist harmoniously in the mind, their combined functioning is philosophy. Hence the concrete life of religion is properly called not religion merely but religion and art at once,

* Not altogether new, in so far as it only restates the fundamental doctrine of Hegel's *Philosophie des Geistes*.

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that is, philosophy. And the same is true of the concrete life of art. So far as any human being succeeds in living and in satisfying somehow the various needs of his mind, so far as he at all finds peace and salvation, he is, certainly, in possession of religion; but not of religion alone. He is, though he may not call himself by that name, a philosopher. His religion is not the only force at work within him: it is supplemented and compensated by the force of art. If he were solely religious, if religion were the only thing he cared for, his personality would be simply swallowed up in the object of his worship. This, Miss Underhill reminds us, does not happen to the mystic.* Certainly it does not, and Gentile never suggests that it does. But the reason why it does not is that the religious impulse to lose oneself in God is balanced by the artistic impulse to assert and express oneself, to find oneself in the very act of self-surrender.

So far, the difference between Gentile's view and that for which Miss Underhill is contending is a mere matter of words. Each is agreed that there is one single and whole spiritual life, which is the true life of man and is actually achieved by human beings in this world; each is agreed that in this life we at once lose ourselves in the contemplation of an absolute object and in that self-surrender find ourselves. Gentile calls this life philosophy, and Miss Underhill calls it mysticism. That is not in itself an important difference. For Gentile does not mean that this life is a privilege of those who have taken a University degree in philosophy, nor does Miss Underhill mean that it is confined to people who get their names mentioned in learned works on Mysticism.

What then is the point on which they differ? It appears from Miss Underhill's opening paragraphs to be this. Gentile's

* She seems even to deny that there is in mysticism a *tendency* for it to happen; but she would no doubt disclaim any intention of denying this.

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philosophy, she thinks, denies outright the existence of any such absolute object of thought as that which the mystics contemplate. This absolute object is one, eternal, and unchanging: Gentile's philosophy, she tells us, is a philosophy of change. It agrees here, she says, with that of Bergson. Its absolute reality is an absolute flux. Hence it stands in the sharpest opposition to all mysticism, whose insistence that its own object is lifted above the flux of things cannot be lightly passed over or explained away.

In this matter I am heartily at one with Miss Underhill. I do think that if we accept a philosophy of change we must describe the experience of the mystics as a peculiar form of hallucination, and it is a hallucination whose origin we shall find it very difficult to explain. But I venture to accuse her of a radical misunderstanding of Gentile's philosophy when she identifies it with the philosophies of change. I know that the same view was lately expressed by Dr. Bosanquet, and it is just because of my deep respect and affection for his memory that I welcome the opportunity of clearing up a question on which I believe him to have made a mistake, without being forced to engage in controversy with one who can no longer reply. For the point is one of some importance and concerns our whole valuation of a philosophy which, whatever its shortcomings, is one of the most remarkable of the present day. And I confine myself to Gentile, because it is in his hands that the tendency common to him and Croce reveals its features most clearly, and that this tendency first gives rise to a considered and consistent philosophy of religion.

Reality, for Gentile, is history. Now history is not, as Miss Underhill assumes, a synonym for change. Change is, if I may put it this way, a realistic concept, history an idealistic. That which changes is a mere object, which need not know that it is changing, and indeed which no one need know to be changing. The philosophy of change is a "metaphysic of being," that is, a philosophy which tries to describe the world as a thing in itself

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without raising the question how it comes to be known. And there can be little doubt that the philosophy of change makes the world unknowable. That which has a history, on the other hand, is a mind, for matter may change but it cannot be said to have a history. And this mind knows its own history. It is simply by knowing its own history that, in Gentile's view, it comes to have a history at all. Hence Gentile's philosophy is a "metaphysic of knowledge," that is to say, a philosophy which never loses sight of the question "how do we come to know what we know?"

History is thus by definition something known. It is not merely a process, it is a known process. But the mind which knows a process can only do so by somehow detaching itself from and rising above this process. If it were wholly immersed in the process, it would, perhaps, *be* changing, but it could never know that it was changing. And this unknowable process would therefore not really be a process at all; it would not be a change *in* the mind, for the mind would no longer possess that continuity without which no change can take place. One mind would perish at every instant and another would come into being; and that is not change in a mind. Hence change *in* a mind must be change *for* that mind; change of which that mind is conscious; and to be conscious of it, the mind must be somehow raised above it. How is this apparent contradiction to be realized? How is the mind to be at once in change and out of change? Only if the mind *originates change in itself*. For then, as the source and ground of change, it will not be *subject* to change; while on the other hand, as undergoing change through its own free act, it will exhibit change. This double aspect of the mind as active and passive is the very heart of Gentile's philosophy. It is his favourite distinction of *act* and *fact*. The act is out of time in the sense that it creates time, just as it is supernatural in the sense that it creates nature; the fact is temporal, natural, subject to all those laws which constitute its finiteness. But between the act and

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the fact there is no division: the distinction is only an ideal distinction. In creating the fact, the act realizes itself, and does not live apart in a heaven of its own from which it issues mandates for the creation of facts; it lives in the facts which it creates, and can say to the fact, "Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee."*

This identity of act and fact, which is the immanence of which so much is said by Croce, is necessary for the following reason. If the active or creative mind were *merely* active and creative, if what it created were something other than itself, then this other, this created object, would be a mere flux of appearances without permanence, solidity, or substance. Only the permanent can change; and therefore the principle of permanence, the unchanging reality, must be immanent in the very process of change, or this process could not take place. If the changing were one thing and the unchanging another, if that which changed were not also permanent and that which is permanent were not also changing, then both the permanent and the changing would be illusory. If the permanent and creative principle is called God and the changing creation is called the World, we thus reach the formula that it is only the presence of God in the world that makes the world real, and only his self-expression in the act of creating the world that makes God actual. Whether formulæ of this kind, so notoriously common in mystical writings, are really at variance with the spirit of mysticism, I do not take upon myself to say. But they are of the essence of Gentile's philosophy.

Miss Underhill says, however, that mysticism also requires transcendence, and that Gentile denies all transcendence, and hence denies a fundamental principle of mysticism. Her paper suggests that she regards transcendence and mysticism as

* "Autocitisi," "self-creation," is one of Gentile's favourite words for this "pure act."

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synonymous, but we all know from her works that this is not her view, and that she really regards transcendence as one aspect of mysticism, complementary to immanence. Now here again there is some danger of a quarrel about words. Gentile gives the name religion or mysticism to the element of transcendence or the losing of the mind in its object, an element, as he tells us, of all human life but not the only element. To the element of immanence he gives the name of art. And these two elements are always actually found together in the synthesis which is philosophy. In this synthesis, therefore, transcendence is always present, but is never the last word; it is dialectically present as one of the two elements whose tension constitutes the life of the whole, but the last word lies with the synthesis which is neither mere transcendence nor mere immanence, but the principle called by De Ruggiero *absolute immanence*. Here the word absolute is not loosely used for "pure," as Miss Underhill seems to think: it is used in a well-defined technical sense. The absolute, in this sense, is that which has reconciled its own opposite to itself, and therefore no longer stands in opposition to it. This usage is quite common in the Italian idealists, especially in De Ruggiero. But it goes back to a very respectable antiquity. Thus the metaphysic of *absolute immanence* is the philosophy whose primary principle, that of immanence, has overcome its own abstractness by including in itself its own opposite, namely, the principle of transcendence. And the only sense in which Gentile ever denies all transcendence is that he denies *in toto* its right to be considered as the ultimate solution of the problem of philosophy. Thus Gentile is as convinced of the necessity of transcendence as Miss Underhill herself, and differs from her, here again, in the use of words only. That reconciliation of the opposing principles of immanence and transcendence which both regard as possible, necessary, and indeed actual, she calls mysticism, and he calls it philosophy.

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This broad agreement between Gentile and his critic is recognized by Miss Underhill herself when she comes to mention Hegel. Hegel's Absolute Spirit, she says, is all that mysticism requires; though she takes this back by adding that, so far as Hegel identifies reality with history and becoming, he falls into the modern error of regarding time as ultimately real. This is an accusation which would surprise Hegel as much as it would Gentile. For both alike, reality is the absolute spirit; so far there is no difference between them. For both alike, time is created by this absolute spirit in the process of its own activity; it is a product of that activity, not its condition. Here again, Hegel and Gentile are in perfect agreement. Bergsonism is as repugnant to Hegel as it can possibly be to Gentile; and how repugnant it is to *him* can be judged from De Ruggiero's strong remarks on its spiritual emptiness in *Modern Philosophy* (E.T.), p. 370. Here, as usual, the views of Gentile are pretty well in agreement with those expressed by De Ruggiero. Miss Underhill, in fact, seems anxious to detect differences between the idealism of Hegel and that of the modern Italians where in fact none exist. I do not mean that there are no differences; but the views to which she takes exception in the Italians are really not "new"—the Italians would be indignant at being labelled "new idealists," as if their philosophy were something different from the well-established tradition of post-Kantian idealism—but are the commonplaces of the post-Kantian tradition. It is indeed simply because they are commonplaces that she has not quite understood them; for Gentile's books are written for the student who is presumed to have been already well drilled in the philosophy of Kant and his successors. Hence the argument which I have set forth and described as the heart of Gentile's philosophy is for the most part rather assumed than stated by himself. It is the common ground of all idealism, and he takes for granted the reader's knowledge of it. Had he not done so, had he written a philosophical book for the

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untrained reader, he would have laid upon it an emphasis which he nowhere actually gives it. Thus his books are easy for the non-Italian reader to misunderstand: and this is especially the case if the reader approaches them with Bergson in his mind. Gentile never takes it into his head to point out his own divergences from Bergson; he evidently sees no reason why he should do so, because he rightly thinks that there is between them no common ground. Hence I do not know that he even mentions the French philosopher in the whole course of his works.

The only divergence of view which I have so far been able to find between Miss Underhill and Gentile is that, for Gentile, the absolute spirit which is the ground of time and change subjects *itself* to these laws and does not impose them upon a reality outside itself; whereas I gather that Miss Underhill wants an absolute which is not merely the creator of time and change, but is not itself bound by the laws of its own making and is therefore to be described as *unchanging*. This negative qualification of the absolute goes beyond the positive qualification by which it is described as the author and ground of change. But I may be wrong in thinking that Miss Underhill would insist on this negative term; and if she does, I feel bound to remind her that she has (rightly, I think) denounced those philosophies which claim to say what the universe *is not*.

But I suspect that there may be graver differences not yet brought to light. In the first place, when she asks whether this or that philosophy can dispense with mysticism, the phrase conveys to my mind the following suggestion. I do not know whether Miss Underhill would endorse the suggestion or not. It is that philosophy, by its very nature as discursive thinking, is incapable of reaching ultimate truths, since these can only be reached by a kind of intellectual intuition; and this disability on the part of philosophy attaches with especial force to those philosophies which most emphatically renounce all claim to the

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possession of such intuition. Now it is notorious that all idealism since Kant has maintained that ultimate truth is to be reached, if at all, only by hard thinking, by the critical development of rational theory, and not by any kind of intellectual intuition. There are to-day philosophies which still claim such an intuition, but none of these are idealistic, and Miss Underhill's selection of an object for attack suggests that she thinks the intuition of the mystic to be a revelation of ultimate truth which the modern idealist misses by his own fault; while the intuitionist like Bergson stands a chance of achieving it.

Now if it is true that ultimate truths are to be reached by the path of intuition, and not by the "labour of the notion," then certainly all idealism is futile. So is all scientific and historical thinking. And the only thing left for the person who wants to get at the truth is to return like Nebuchadnezzar to the level of the instinctive animals and *s'installer dans le mouvement*, instead of trying to raise himself above it in order to understand it. I do not know if Miss Underhill means to recommend the example of Nebuchadnezzar, but such counsel is a good deal in fashion to-day. If on the other hand she means to recommend not the instinctive or infra-rational intuition of a Bergson but some supra-rational intuition, I can only reply that I want further particulars of it. Is it the intuitive *voûs* of Aristotle; and does she really mean us to go back to that as an ideal of knowledge? If so, then modern philosophy is indeed bankrupt. But if not, what is it? Whatever it is, it is intuitive; and that means that it cannot explain or indeed express itself; and so it is perhaps useless for us to demand a description of it. It is as indescribable in itself as it is unable to describe the truths it apprehends. It can only be the non-existent way of apprehending the non-existent.

But, I may be told, this intuitive thought is actually enjoyed by the mystics. It is non-existent; it is a quite familiar ex-

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perience, and its object is the ultimate reality. To this I should reply that I have no doubt either of the existence or of the validity of the mystical experience. But I have the gravest doubts about its intuitive or immediate character. It is a common thing that people who have certain experiences should be unable to give an account of them, and it is hardly less common that they should give a wrong account. If you ask an artist how he composes his works of art, you may get for answer, "I don't know"; or you may, and often do, get a description which is demonstrably false, and recognizably derived not from genuine introspection but from some philosophy or psychology in fashion at the moment. I suggest that this, which is so flagrantly true of artists, may perhaps be true of mystics also; and that we ought carefully to distinguish between the real mystical experience and the account of that experience which the mystic himself gives when asked for one. Now Christian mysticism—I am not entitled to express an opinion about other kinds—grew up in close contact with a theory of knowledge derived from Greek sources and culminating in the theory of intuitive *νοῦς* as the method of apprehending ultimate realities. This being the theory accepted by all psychologists of the period, there was every inducement for the mystic, when trying to give an account of the psychology of his own mystical experience, to describe it as an intellectual intuition. And this does not prove that it really was an intellectual intuition, any more than the way in which artists describe their own psychology in terms of Schopenhauer proves that Schopenhauer's philosophy is the true account of the æsthetic experience. Nor on the other hand does the fact that the theory of *νοῦς* is discredited, as it certainly is, prove that the mystical experience is an illusion. All it proves is that the mystical experience is not really immediate.

We need then to distinguish between mystical experiences and descriptive theories of them. The mystics of history have com-

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monly described their experiences in terms of a philosophy now out of date, a philosophy which no competent person now accepts. This need not induce us to throw mysticism overboard as an illusion, but it saddles us with the serious duty of re-describing it in terms of our own philosophy. Modern idealism maintains that all experience is mediate, and therefore it is bound to show that mystical experience is mediate too, and that the traditional account of it as intuitive mutilates and distorts it. I do not think that this is a difficult task. It is easy to show that all sorts of processes of thought have been going on in the mystic's mind, and that the only reason why he overlooked their presence was that he tried his utmost to bring his experience within the narrow frame of the intuitive theory of knowledge. That theory once destroyed mysticism is easier, not harder, to welcome as a genuine form of experience.

I ought perhaps to close with a rough sketch of the way in which a modern idealistic philosophy might carry out this programme. I am aware that in doing so I recklessly expose myself to criticism; but criticism is what I want. Mysticism, then, is a thing which an idealistic philosophy cannot dispense with, in the sense that it cannot frame a view of human life without including it. The function of mysticism in such a view will be not to take the place of scientific or philosophical thought but to have a place of its own. Its peculiarity is perhaps to be sought in the fact that in it the mediation which is actually present is not wholly explicit: the mind reaches truths, but does not know how it has reached them. It may even think that it has not reached them by *any* path, that is by any describable process of thinking; but this, if it is believed, is wrongly believed. The truths in question are reached somehow, and it is the business of scientific or philosophical thought to lay bare this concealed process, to render explicit the mediation which in the mystical experience itself was only implicit. "Substantial truth," said

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Hegel, and every idealist will agree, "is not dependent for its first revelation upon philosophy." In the mystical experience substantial truth is actually attained, and it remains for philosophy to explain how it was attained. If the mystic likes to hug the idea that his truths were revealed to him by a miracle which no philosophy can explain or describe, such a self-deception is his own affair. That is not mysticism, but a superstitious belief about mysticism. | The necessity of mystical experience lies in the principle that we discover new truths neither by the inference of the logic-books nor by the intuition of Aristotle, but by an act of mind which reaches out beyond the given, grasps the new thought as it were in the dark, and only after that consolidates its new conquest by building up to it a bridge of reasoned proof. (But the building of this bridge, which is the task of reflection, is only the bringing out into visibility on the sensitive plate of what has already been recorded upon it, the rendering explicit of a mediation or proof which was already there implicitly. The darkness and obscurity which all mystics recognize as a feature of their own experience, by whatever name they call it (inexpressible, ineffable, etc.), is nothing but the implicitness of thought in the mystical experience. Thus the mystical experience is never complete in itself, it always requires to be explicated and tested by philosophical reflection, which alone can say what it is that in our mystical experience we have discovered, and indeed whether we have discovered anything at all, and have not been merely the victims of an illusion. For taken by itself, the mystical experience may always be illusory, and this is fully admitted by Miss Underhill when she speaks of "the excesses to which it has always been liable." To check these excesses something other than mysticism is obviously necessary, and this we find in the discipline, without which mysticism would be mere vapouring, of conscious critical thought. This thought is philosophy, and it is the business of philosophy to criticize

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mysticism, not the business of mysticism to criticize philosophy. But, as the old verse has it, which is philosopher and which is mystic, "God bless us all, that's quite another thing."*

* Miss Underhill appeals for an explanation of the saying that reality is not (does not exist) but creates itself. The word "exist" here means to exist in a perfectly pure undifferentiated and unchanging self-identity. This is the technical sense of the word fixed by Hegel in the first category of his logic. When Gentile says that reality does not exist he is only saying that it is not a mere empty undifferentiated *one*, but that it has within it articulations, processes, activities. He is denying rather the adequacy of the category than its abstract applicability.

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